

HUNTER, John

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Two further letters of John Hunter and notes on Rockingham's last illness from Hunter's Case Book.

THROUGH THE KINDNESS OF the Marquis of Lansdowne it is possible to publish two letters written by John Hunter which are preserved in the Muniment Room at Bowood. The first letter gives a glimpse into the human side of Hunter's character. At the time it was written he was Surgeon-Extraordinary to the King and at the height of his career. Though handicapped by ill-health he was busy at St. George's Hospital and with the cares of a large practice ; added to this he was working half through the night at the elucidation of ideas which, as he said, filled his head "like a bee-hive." Yet in the midst of this turmoil we find him quietly sitting down to write a letter on behalf of a humble patient who needed the help that he himself could not give. The fact that the man was a butcher who "often brought me curious parts of animals" doubtless quickened his interest and set him to do his best for the patient. We do not know that his efforts bore fruit, although a passage in the second letter implies that My Lord's interest was aroused, but to Hunter's credit the attempt was made and it proves his readiness to help a friend.

The letters, of which copies have been presented to the Library, were addressed to the first Lord Lansdowne and are as follows :—

MY LORD,

I have several times of late made Barkley square in my way, with an intention to wait upon your Lordship ; but as it was to ask a favour, my Heart as often faild me. (altho I do not think myself a Coward, nor your Lordships manner austere) but being consciouse of the many teasing applications, that both your Lordships known natural disposition to assist, and the expectations that your situation raises, in those who have the honour of knowing you, were the causes of that delicacy, which your Lordship has reason to wish was more universal ; but as I could not well refuse a promise to apply to you I now take the liberty to fulfill that promise. There is a poor man who is a Butcher by trade, but so unhealthy in London, that he cannot follow his business. He has often brought me curious parts of animals, and has a turn of mind with a degree of ingenuity that far exceds many in better situations. He wants a Tide waiter's\* place. I spoke to Sir William Musgrave about him, who promised to put him down as an occasional one, but that imploy is so uncertain, that it will be of little use. I spoke to Mr. Bromfield to speak to the Marquise of Rockingham, and I was in hopes (when I was call'd to him) to have been able to have done it myself. If your Lordship would chuse to see me, I will call to know when. I have the Honour to be with great Respect your Lordships most Humble servant.

JOHN HUNTER.

Jermyn Street.

July 29th, 1782.

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\* *Tide-Waiter*.—An officer who awaits the arrival of vessels to secure the payment of duties.



MY LORD,

I did myself the honor to wait upon your Lordship, to thank you for your very polite and obliging Letter. Conceiving it possible, that your Lordship might not be acquainted with the inferior parts of the Treasury and to save your Lordship the trouble of inquiring the mode ; I wrote to a friend of mine belonging to the customhouse, and he sent me in answer the enclosed which I take the liberty to enclose to your Lordship. The man's name is John Taylor aged 45 your Lordship will I hope excuse this trouble, as it is intended to lessen another. I hope this Country will once more rise in fame. I think it has still some powers left, and I am certain your Lordship has resolution to use them. Long may you live to save it is the wish of your Lordship much obliged and most Humble servant.

JOHN HUNTER.

Augst 16, 1782.

While looking up the names cited in these letters I came upon an account of the Marquis of Rockingham's\* last illness, death and post-mortem examination, recorded by Hunter himself. The descriptions, apparently unpublished, may suitably find place here to balance the lack of medical material in the letters. The account of the illness is as follows :—

### HUNTER'S MANUSCRIPT CASE-BOOK (p. 708)

#### HYDROPS PECTORIS (*crossed through*)

##### The Marquis of Rockingham's Case

About the Year One thousand seven Hundred and fifty Nine, he said that he had a fall from his Horse ; in this fall he said he was thrown several Yards, and received a hurt about the Pitt of the Stomach. How far he was sensible at the time to know he had received a blow there, I am not certain, but from that time to his death, he complained of pain in that part.

The account given of this supposed fall by a Gentleman that was present is the following, that the Marquis did not fall, but by pulling up the Horse forcibly and quickly to keep him from stumbling, that he conceived he had torn some of the fibers of the part. The pain was such as generally arises from the Par Vagum and Intercostal Nerves when diseased Viz Oppressive ; and appeared to be either the cause of, or was greatly increased by Wind in the Stomach and Intestines, for Wind was observed to be often moving in the bowels at those

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\* *Charles Watson-Wentworth, 2nd Marquis of Rockingham* (1730-July, 1782), the subject of the above notes, was educated at Westminster School and St. John's College, Cambridge. He was elected F.R.S. in 1751 and was installed K.G. on the 6th May, 1760, and on the accession of George III, continued in the office of Lord of the Bed-chamber which he had held since 1751.

He was assiduous in attendance on Keppel during his court-martial at Portsmouth, and, on the Admiral's acquittal, moved in the House of Lords a vote of thanks for his outstanding services. He also delivered an address on the impoverished state of Ireland and led the attack on Lord Sandwich's administration of the Navy which sent Kampenfeldt to sea with an inadequate force.

He was a Whig of sterling honesty who fought strenuously against a corrupt system of government. Although twice Prime Minister, the King had no great opinion of him but he misjudged the Marquis ; a far better estimate of Rockingham's worth was that of Burke who esteemed him as a man of sound principles, enlarged mind, clear and sagacious sense, and unbroken fortitude.



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times, and when it passed it gave ease. The pain was not constant ; but I do not know if any reason could be assigned for its returns. Every Physician and Surgeon in Europ of any Note was consulted, and various were the opinions of the cause of this Pain. It was sometimes imagined that a hardness was felt externally in the part, but that idea again vanished. The Liver, Gall bladder and ducts were very much suspected. Blisters, Caustics, Plaisters etc were applied to the Part, and all the Warm and Nervous Medicines were prescribed, as also Opium to quiet. He probably visited every Bath in Europ as also every kind at Bath but nothing appeared to give any relief. The two last Years of his Life he took too violent Exercise, as hunting as also setting late up at Night, but all this was with a view to divert the mind for it was anxiously interwoven with the affairs of the Nation, and for the last ten Years of his Life he was the support of an Opposition to the pursuit of those Measures which he had (when in power) given up ; and for the last half Year of his Life was (probably) planning the best mode of doing again the same thing.

These circumstances most probably created or encreased his anxiety of Mind, which always encreased, or even seemed to renew the Pain.

His own idea of the disease was, that there was some unnatural Substance formed or lodged in the part ; sometimes it was a Solid, often a fluid as Water, and at other times it appeared to be air. He conceived that by opening the belly the disease might be discover'd, and relief of course might be procured, and when in much pain ; he would often solicit an operation but none chose to perform an Operation without a visible diseased guide.

For some Weeks before death he was not quite so well as usual in other respects at times a little short breath'd, and for some days before death he made but little Water ; but the Old complaint did not abate upon the commencement of others, but rather encreased, and on the Morning of his death the pain and oppression became so violent that he became almost outrageous for some operation to be attempted, and said that if something was not immediately done to relieve him he could not possibly live many hours. a few hours before Death he had the following Symptoms. The pain at times was excessive, and then he seemed to be roused into a sensibility of Mind for then he was clear in his imagination, and seemed to have considerable Strength of body, but he would immediately fall into a kind of Stuper with his Eyes half shut, and in this Stuper he did not breath, this cessation of breathing each time lasted about twenty seconds and when he came out of this, or was spoke to, he then breathed much stronger than common, as if making up the lost time. The pulse was weak but regular and did not appear to be much affected by the peculiar mode of breathing. He all along, could lie down perfectly horrizontally, either on his back or on either side equally.

His bowels were regular.

Just before death one of these cessations of breathing became longer than usual, the constitution appeared to be sensible of it for he was thrown into convulsions the face became black as if choaking and he seemed to give two or three strong inspirations and expired.

*Vide Dissections No. 191.*

The Case-book was written up by an amanuensis with corrections and additions by Hunter himself. At the end of the above account a separate slip, entirely in his handwriting, is inserted and runs :



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As this case had call'd forth the attention of almost every Physical man in London and nothing had ever been made out ; the appearance after death became an object of inquiry, and many were anxious to be present at the examination which was attended by Dr. Wm. Hunter, Dr. Warren, Mr. Bromfield and opened by J. Hunter.

The post-mortem findings are recorded in

*Morbid Appearances in Dead Bodys.* Manuscript, P.317

### **No. 191. The appearances upon opening the Body of the Marquis of Rockingham**

As the seat of the disease appeared to be about the Pitt of the Stomach great attention was paid to this part in the Mode of opening, and instead of an incision made down the *Linea alba* a crucial incision was made from the margin of the Thorax lateraly across the Navle to each [crest] of the Ilium ; this preserved regarding the Pitt of the Stomach intire ; and upon raising the flap and looking under it, we found no adhesion and every thing to appearance in a Sound State. The Sternum was next removed, and in the seperation of the diaphragm from the Sternum etc its attachment was carefully examined but nothing preternatural could be observed. upon examining every Viscus in the Abdomen, every thing was found perfectly Sound as to Structure both the external and internal appearance and also when cut into. In the Cavity of the Thorax we found a considerable quantity of Water. in the right side there was a quart and the best part of a pint ; and in the left above a pint and a half. The water was a pretty clear Serum.

The Lungs were perfectly sound, not the least adhesions anywhere.

The Heart was large and strong in its coats and full of coagulated Blood. Two of the Semelunar Valves were ossify'd in some parts but not remarkably so.

From the foregoing it is clear that Hunter was present at Rockingham's last illness, the concluding phases of which he observed with characteristic keenness. The post-mortem failed to account for symptoms of more than 20 years' duration but Hunter entered the case as one of "Hydrops pectoris" in his Case-book. Such an affliction might well have caused Rockingham to seek relief at "every Bath in Europ as also every kind at Bath."

S. WOOD

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